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The Vantage
Point
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under
Johnson

Johnson: 'I Prayed That Hanoi... Would Respond'

This is the 11th of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

WHEN I TOOK THE OATH as President in January 1965 to begin my first full term in office; I felt that it would be my last, and this feeling grew stronger with every passing week in the White House.

For several years Lady Bird and I had spoken many times about our plans to leave the White House at the end of my first full term. Her position had remained perfectly clear and consistent since she had first expressed it to me in the spring of 1963: She did not want me to be a candidate in 1968. We discussed often how to select the proper time and the right occasion to make the announcement.

Long before I had settled on the proper forum to make my announcement, I told a number of people of my intention not to run again. As far back as the summer of 1965 I had discussed the subject with Willard Deason, whom I had known for many years.

A few months afterward, late in the fall of 1965, I confided in Arthur Krim. He and his wife, Mathilde, were loyal and devoted friends, and Arthur was a valued adviser on matters relating to the Democratic party.

I talked with John Connally early in 1967 at the LBJ Ranch. He was formulating plans of his own at the time. He told me that he had no desire to seek another term as Governor, but that he would run again if I wanted him on the ticket with me in Texas. I told him that I felt certain I would not run and suggested that he base his own decision on that assumption.

In September 1967 I discussed the subject with another friend, George Christian, my press secretary. We were in Texas at the time, and I asked George to get Governor Connally's help in preparing a statement in which I could announce my decision. I thought then that I might find an appropriate occasion to use it later in the year.

I talked privately about the likelihood of my not running in 1968 with both Dean Rusk and Bob McNamara, two of my most trusted advisers. One July evening in 1967, while sitting in the small room adjoining the President's Oval Office, I confided to Secretary McNamara the fact that I had had with Connally. I told Bob I had been convinced that once the announcement was made the press would read

significance into Connally's decision not to run, as it related to my plans. McNamara assured me many times that he would continue to serve as Secretary of Defense as long as I wanted and needed him, and I know he meant it. As a footnote to history, had I contemplated another four year in the White House, I would not have wanted Bob McNamara to leave the government, any more than I would have wanted Dean Rusk to leave.

At a meeting in the Cabinet Room on October 3, 1967, I again shared my thoughts with Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, and with several other top advisers who were present. They included Walt Rostow, Dick Helms of the CIA, and George Christian.

December came, but a good forum for my announcement failed to materialize, and I put the matter aside for a few weeks. I began to think about including my decision in my State of the Union address to the Congress in January. When I went to Australia to attend the memorial service for Prime Minister Harold Holt late in December 1967, I took Horace Busby with me. A former aide, Busby had worked with me on messages in the past. During the trip I told him what I planned to do and what I wanted to say. I asked him to try his hand at a statement. Busby's draft arrived two days before I reported on the State of the Union and contained the following paragraph:

"I shall not seek — I have no desire to accept — the nomination of my party for another term in this great office of all the people."

I gave it to my wife to read. In all our conversations about declining to run in 1968, Lady Bird had always been most deferential. She never took the lead in these discussions or forced an opinion or a point of view on me. However, I noticed that she made one important change in Busby's draft. Above the phrase "have no desire to accept" Lady Bird penciled in the words we both preferred: "will not accept."

When I went to the Capitol that night, I thought I had the statement with me but I discovered that I had failed to bring it. Frankly, I cannot say what I would have done that night if the paper had been in my pocket. But my best guess is that I would not have read it.

But I knew that if other Democrats were to have an opportunity to organize and offer their candidacies, they deserved sufficient time to prepare. I decided to make my announcement on decision on timing in 1968. He had finally made his announcement on

March 29. Lady Bird had suggested March as the outside date for announcing my decision not to run. In her memorandum to me of May 1964, recommending that I run for the Presidency that year, she had said: "If you win, let's do the best we can for 3 years and 3 or 4 months — and then, the Lord letting us live that long, announce in February or March 1968 that you are not a candidate for reelection." She told me that the reason March was in her mind was that she had been influenced by President Truman's timing. I found a certain historical satisfaction in following President Truman's precedent. But March 1968 proved to be exactly the right month for me for another reason: It coincided with the new effort I planned to seek the way to peace in Vietnam. I had found the right forum.

A great misconception had been built up by the press that I was a man who was hungry for power, who would not conceivably give up power willingly. Those who believed this estimate did not understand that power can lose its charm when a man has known it as many years as I had. I was consistently amused at being characterized as avid for power on the one hand and soundly criticized for not using power the way it is used ordinarily — in a political way — on the other. Several columnists commented that I did not take sufficient interest in rewarding party contributors or building strong party machinery, but these observations never detracted from the myth of the power-hungry man.

I used the power of the Presidency proudly, and I used every ounce of it I had. I used it to establish programs that gave thousands of youngsters a head start in school, that enabled thousands of old folks to live in clean nursing homes, that brought justice to the Negro and hope to the poor, that forced the nation to face the growing problems of pollution. In this exercise of power, I knew a satisfaction that only a limited number of men have ever known and that I could have had in no other way. Men, myself included, do not lightly give up the opportunity to achieve so much lasting good, but a man who uses power effectively must also be a realist. He must understand that by spending power he dissipates it. Because I had not hesitated to spend the Presidential power in the pursuit of my beliefs or in the interests of my country, I was under no illusion that I had as much power in 1968 as I had had in 1964.

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